

# LANGUAGE AND ADOLESCENT PEER GROUPS

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*This article focuses on the use of linguistic resources from the perspective of the creation and maintenance of adolescent groups and categories, and specifically on the use of aspects of verbal style in the creation and maintenance of distinctiveness. It explores the use of a variety of types of linguistic resources, phonological and grammatical variation, lexical innovation, language crossing, and interactive style. It shows how oppositions with which the group defines itself generally also serve as organizing principles within the group, accounting not only for intergroup but for intragroup differences in language use.*

**Keywords:** *peer groups; language; adolescence; style; identity*

The life stage of adolescence is a product of industrial society, its history closely tied to the development of universal institutionalized secondary education. Modern education, by moving responsibility for vocational preparation into the public sector, has isolated young people from adult society as they move toward adulthood, excluded them from the workforce, and confined them to age-homogeneous institutions (Coleman et al., 1974). Adolescence as we know it, and as we study it, is a response to the constraints (and opportunities) that these conditions place on the age group. And to the extent that there exists a youth culture distinct from adult culture, it is a result of adult-dominated institutional arrangements and expectations. We need, therefore, to be cautious in attributing behavior thought of as typically “adolescent” to biological, cognitive, social, or emotional development. Although there are indeed significant developmental changes taking place during this life stage, the actual effects of those changes can be molded by the situations that they encounter.

The long-term confinement of large numbers of people of diverging backgrounds and interests to a surprisingly small space with considerable constraints on general behavior gives adolescent life a special intensity. Because of this segregation, the move into adolescence involves the establishment of a peer-based social order and the appropriation of social control from adults. The resulting competition for resources, recognition, and power creates a social hothouse effect, as

groups and categories emerge around defining norms and carving out social meaning. The groups that emerge in this environment are central communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000) in the lives of their members. They are primary loci for their participants to view jointly the social world and assess their individual and joint places in it. Language plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of social groups in general, hence of adolescent peer groups. Much of this is accomplished in talk itself in a variety of ways, such as establishing knowledge and entitlement to knowledge (W. Labov, 1972b; Shuman, 1986), negotiating norms (Eckert, 1990; Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Goodwin, 2000) or status (Goodwin, 1991; Kiesling, 1997; Moore, 2002), establishing cohesion and trust (Eder, 1988; W. Labov, 1972b), and sheer play (W. Labov, 1972b). But language also serves a crucial stylistic function, as a visible yet inexplicit means for constructing social meaning. Groups jointly look out on a social landscape and they jointly create distinctiveness for themselves, placing themselves strategically in that landscape. And style is a crucial resource for interpreting the landscape and for defining and claiming a place in it.

The centrality of schooling to adolescence makes the opposition between standard and vernacular language prime material for adolescent stylistic practice. By virtue of its institutional status, standard language is associated with education, institutional affiliation, homogeneity, and conservatism; vernaculars, by contrast, are associated with an anti-institutional stance, local orientation, diversity of contact, and local innovation. Standard and vernacular language features manifest themselves in stylistic practice not simply as elements of ready-made ways of speaking but as resources for the construction of more complex styles. Particular linguistic features may on occasion directly index social categories, but more commonly they index particular stances (such as toughness or intellectual superiority) that are constitutive of those categories (Ochs, 1991). And a single linguistic feature, rather than conveying meaning on its own, may be deployed for multiple purposes and combined with others to create a style rich in social meaning through the use of wide-ranging linguistic choices in the realms of voice quality and prosody; segmental phonology; morphology; syntax; discourse; lexicon; and speech acts, activities, and events. Speech style in turn joins with other aspects of style such as clothing (Eckert, 1980, 2000), makeup (Mendoza-Denton, 1996), substance use, musical taste, territory, activities, and movement (Eckert, 1989) to make identity claims.

A focus on the use of language to create boundaries is not meant to imply a view of groups and categories as homogeneous. Group and individual identity are nested and complementary (Laks, 1983), as the oppositions with which the group defines itself generally also serve as organizing principles within the group. This kind of nesting of oppositions, or recursiveness (Gal & Irvine, 1995), is an important part

of the relation between the individual and the wider social order and shows up in a variety of studies of linguistic variation. In groups that use strong vernacular to distinguish themselves as anti-institutional, differences within the group in anti-institutional feeling correspond to greater use of vernacular (Eckert, 1989, 1996, 2000; W. Labov, 1972a; Laks, 1983).

Labeling is an important means of producing and maintaining social distinctions, as the coining of a term for a social type creates a category and allows the category to enter into everyday discourse. Labels do not emerge abstractly but arise in use and in relation to specific people in real situations (Bucholtz, 2001; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995). It is in speech activities such as making observations and judgments about people, pointing people out to others, and describing absent people that speakers simultaneously exert social control and in the process create categorizations by endowing labels with meaning. In every school, a proliferation of labels maps out the local social terrain, the margins of respectability, and the terms of evaluation (T. Labov, 1992). To the extent that category labels signal distinctions that are particularly locally based, the use of social category labels (like the use of other local terms such as landmark nicknames) can (be an attempt to) mark the speaker as a member, as “in the know” (Brenneis, 1977).

*Slang* is a term commonly used to refer to lexical innovation by delegitimized groups—among them adolescents—implying a qualitative difference from other kinds of lexical innovation. Although slang is commonly thought of in terms of individual words, it is generally also part of a style. This style may be sufficiently elaborated to be comprehensible only within the community that produces it. For example, the distance of the slang used in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (Roth-Gordon, 2001) or the Verlan spoken by a predominantly North African and poor adolescent population in the suburbs of Paris (Méla, 1997) is an indication of the distance of their speakers from “standard” society. And the extent and the ways in which these slangs transform Portuguese and French give them an insolent and threatening quality.

Both Méla and Roth-Gordon emphasize that slang usage that originates in, and represents, disaffected groups of adolescents, also is picked up by more middle-class youth to establish their connection to youth culture. But their orientation to the communities where the slangs originate is limited to a desire to adopt some of their autonomy—to set themselves off from the older generation but not to set themselves off from the middle class. Similarly, in the United States, White Anglo kids use Latino and African American vernacular English features to signal coolness, toughness, or attitude. And although these acts of identity may indicate admiration, the admiration is for a specific set of attributes and, as such, preserves the racial hierarchy (Bucholtz, 1999; Cutler, 1999; Hill, 1993).

Adolescents lead other age groups in linguistic change—both the “regular” change that would take place no matter what, such as sound change (Chambers, 1995)—and quite probably in the coining of lexical items, discourse markers, intonation patterns, and so forth. It would be a mistake to think of adolescents as simply inventing new ways of saying the same things; by virtue of their transitional place in the life course, adolescents are in a particularly strong position to respond to change in the conditions of life, and in so doing bring about lasting social change. Social change can be seen in cases in which groups call on language to challenge such things as gender norms (Bucholtz, 1996). But it is particularly apparent with immigrant groups that adolescents are society’s transition teams, reinterpreting the world, resolving the old with the new, substrate with superstrate, culture with culture, local with transnational. Méla (1997) emphasizes the role of Verlan in forging an “interstitial” identity among the young North African adolescent population. Tetrault (2000) describes *hachek*, the multilingual punning of French adolescents of North African descent that allows kids to play with cultural meaning as they construct a new cultural space or, as she puts it, to create “cultural crossroads from which to speak.” By virtue of their location in time and social and cultural space, immigrant adolescents have special knowledge, and in working with this knowledge—in making new meanings—they construct authenticity of a new kind. They are not just resolving ethnicity, gender, class, and race for today but constructing permanent meanings that they will carry into adulthood, to be worked on by the next generation.

Rampton (1995), in his study of crossing among immigrant youth in the United Kingdom, argues that kids use other languages as a means of expressing affiliation across ethnic lines. And Roberts (2000), in her study of the history of the creolization of Hawaiian English Pidgin, found that in the early days of immigration into Hawaii, kids whose native languages were Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese tended to learn enough of each other’s languages to be able to play together. But as the number of multilingual but Hawaiian-born kids increased, Pidgin became a common language and symbolic of a new kind of locally based social order. Roberts argues that it was within adolescent peer groups, and specifically as a vehicle of common identity separate both from adults and from the dominant White Anglo population of Hawaii, that the Pidgin became elaborated and developed into a creole.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a life stage, adolescence is generally compared with adulthood, rather than with the life stage that precedes it. As a result, comparisons

tend to be negative, and adolescents tend to be viewed in terms of the development that they have not yet accomplished rather than what they have accomplished. Rather than seeing the adolescent social order as a poor version of the adult one, it would be productive to see it as the tremendous leap that it is from the arrangements of childhood.

The definition of adolescents as an institutionalized population is intensified by the ubiquitous adult gaze and the construction of moral panics around the behavior of (usually non-White, non-middle class, and often female) adolescents. These moral panics quite regularly focus on language (Cameron, 1995), and the hegemonic view of adolescents as immature, irresponsible, and deviant sets their language use up as problematic (Eckert, in press). The projection of these supposed adolescent traits onto their supposed ways of speaking (e.g., irresponsible, uncontrolled, rebellious, and sloppy) is part of the process of naturalization of adolescence and of the relation between language and social types (Gal & Irvine, 1995). The common belief that adolescents are not developing proper verbal skills, manifesting itself in public panics about such things as "mallspeak," are seized upon, indeed manufactured, by media as mind candy for a hungry public. The characterization, for example, of the discourse marker *like* as reflecting insouciance or worse, moral turpitude, is belied by linguistic analyses of the innovative semantic functions that it plays (Romaine & Lange, 1991). The adult gaze encourages adolescents to see themselves as an age group, to adopt adult definitions of them and their behavior (such as the fascination with peer pressure), but to take some pride in their apparent exoticism. To use current terminology, adults have *otherized* adolescents.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

If I were to make recommendations for future study of the language of adolescents, I would take the risk of appearing contradictory, and argue that adolescents could benefit from more research on middle-aged adult speech than research on adolescent speech. And particularly, I would like to see research on adults that takes the perspective that so much research on adolescent language takes. Most particularly, examination of identity construction, social groups, and peer pressure would help demystify the notion of adolescent language and to put these phenomena into a more central perspective.

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